The Changing Workforce: Implications for the Employment of Workers who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

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The workplace has and continues to change over time. This paper addresses three key changes in the workplace in order to highlights issues that will impact the workforce participation of persons who are deaf or hard of hearing. Rehabilitation service providers must be cognizant of these changes in order to adequately prepare the consumers we serve for a successful career.

The Changing Pool of Workers

The labor force is expected to expand by the year 2005, up 24 million (19%) from 1992. The pool of workers from the "baby boomer" generation (born between 1946 and 1964) is expected to grow most rapidly. Although the work force is expected to expand, the pool of new labor force entrants is shrinking (Fullerton, 1993). Workers who are deaf or hard of hearing, similar to all persons with disabilities, will be impacted disproportionately by these trends. For example, while a steady decline in the labor force participation of men has taken place for two decades, men with disabilities between the ages of 55-64 have experienced the largest decline (Yelin, 1993). The percentage of women in the work force, though stabilizing relative to the increases in the 1970s and 1980s, will continue to grow; however, women with disabilities have experienced less of an increase than women without disabilities (Yelin, 1991). Although the level of full-time employment has remained relatively constant over the last several years for workers without disabilities, it has decreased for workers with disabilities. While part-time employment has increased for both disabled and non-disabled workers, it has increased more for workers with disabilities (Yelin & Katz, 1994).

The baby boom generation (now aged 34 to 52) is expected to continue to cause fierce competition for advancement opportunities. During the next decade, the youngest of the baby boomers will turn 40. As this cohort ages, two concerns will take on added importance. First, as a normal function of aging, more of the "boomers" will experience some form of disability. For many, this disability will be hearing loss, one of the most frequent disabilities experienced during aging (National Center for Health Statistics, 1988). Thus, the number of hard of hearing and late deafened workers will increase. Secondly, as "boomers" age, they are also likely to face additional barriers in the workplace associated with being older as well as having a disability.

For the younger generation poised to enter the job market, a different set of challenges must be addressed. Even though the shrinking entry-level labor pool would seemingly create more employment opportunities for younger persons with disabilities, they remain significantly less employed than their counterparts who do not have disabilities. The 1995 Current Population Survey reveals that only 28% of the 16.8 million working age non-institutionalized people with a work disability were employed, while 75% of working age people without a disability were employed. A Louis Harris and Associates (1994) survey indicates that two-thirds of working age people with disabilities are not working, even though an overwhelming majority of those who are not working (79% in 1994) state they want to work.

Studies of employment rates for deaf and hard of hearing graduates of secondary schools

indicate unemployment rates two to three times higher than rates for hearing counterparts, especially at the early stages of their career (MacLeod-Gallinger, 1992). Fewer than one-third of the respondents between the ages of 20-34 who wanted to work could find a job. Limited information documents the employment status of persons who are hard of hearing or late deafened. However there is ample evidence that these persons experience work related problems that in many instances result in voluntarily leaving the workplace (Boone, Scherich, Berkay, Geyer, 1995).

Women and persons from racial ethnic minority groups also face employment challenges. Their employment rates have consistently been lower than those for whites and for men with disabilities. In addition, African Americans represent a significantly larger proportion of working age people with disabilities when compared with whites or Hispanics, and as a group are more severely disabled. Among persons with disabilities in 1992, the full-time employment rate was 15.9% for whites, 7.2% for African-Americans, and 8.2% for Hispanic Americans (Braddock & Bachelder, 1994). The earnings of women with disabilities with full-time jobs were only 65% of earnings of men with disabilities employed full-time (Bowe, 1992). Women with disabilities are more frequently employed part-time, rather than full-time, compared with men with disabilities. The limited information available regarding the deaf and hard of hearing persons from racial ethnic minority groups indicates these individuals do not attain the same occupational levels as their white or Asian counterparts (MacLeod-Gallenger, 1993).

The Nature of Jobs

During 1983 to 1993, every major occupational group experienced growth (Rosenthal, 1995). The largest numerical growth was experienced within the service sector of the economy. Over the next decade, service occupations are projected to experience the largest numerical growth (Gradler & Schrammel, 1994). Thus, the shift from a manufacturing economy to a service economy is expected to continue. Many job categories that have long been occupational strongholds of persons who are deaf, precision production, machine operative, and clerical jobs (Christiansen, 1982), are predicted to experience slow growth or decline. Even good workers in "cold" occupations are at risk of job loss or underemployment. New entrants may face prolonged periods of unemployment prior to entering these occupations.

The level of competition for promotion and better paying jobs has increased. This increased competition is due to changes in the labor pool, notably the large bulge of boomers. Increased competition for promotions has also resulted from employers' search for efficiency. To become more efficient, many employers have been downsizing their workforces, often by thinning their number of middle managers. Employers have also been relying more on temporary workers and have been "outsourcing" selected support functions. The number of people employed by temporary agencies increased 240% between 1985 and 1993 (Thomson, 1995), creating a growing "contingent" workforce. These agencies typically offer lower salaries and the work assignments are not secure.

Skills Needed for Future Work Force

For the person who is preparing to enter the labor force, a number of basic skills are needed to be competitive. Employers trust their ability to train literate workers. They believe employees with strong reading, writing, and computation skills can be trained to perform available jobs. Literacy is a critical key to success in the workplace. Without adequate reading and writing skills, workers cannot perform well in today's workplace and will fare even worse in the workplace of tomorrow (U.S. Department of Education, 1992). Jobs in the future will demand higher and more sophisticated levels of literacy (Association of Community-based Education, 1986; Mikulecky, 1988).

According to the U.S. Department of Education (1992), "Much of the reading required in a cross-section of jobs ranks between the 8th and 12th grade levels" (p.4). Evidence suggests that workers who are deaf or hard of hearing can succeed in the workplace if they possess these requisite skills. For example, follow-up studies of deaf and hard of hearing graduates of postsecondary education, find persons with this training (and qualification) achieve some socioeconomic parity with similarly educated peers who hear (Barnartt & Christiansen, 1996; Schroedel, Geyer & McGee, 1996; Watson, 1995).

Literacy represents a minimal competency, and the most employable job seekers will be expected to possess additional skills. Research on basic workplace skills desired by employers indicates that the most competitive job seekers are expected to be skilled at (a) learning how to learn, (b) reading, writing, and computation, (c) listening and oral communication, (d) adaptability, including creative thinking and problem solving, (e) self management, including self-esteem, goal setting/motivation, and personal/career development, (f) ability to work in groups, including interpersonal, negotiation, and teamwork skills, and (g) ability to influence others, including leadership skills (Carnevale, Gainer, & Meltzer, 1988). These basic skills are required across all types of work and are needed in addition to any specialized job training or technical/vocational skills needed to work in a specific occupation.

Finally, the worker of the future will have to be technologically sophisticated. Currently one of the most common job training needs revolves around the use of contemporary technology, especially in the area of electronic communications. Advancements in electronic technologies (e-mail, fax, computer networking, telecommunications) have enabled digital, wireless transfer of audio, text, and visual information. To avoid information overload and to maintain employability, many employees will need to be skilled in the use of electronic modes of communication.

Technology sophistication and literacy are highly related. With the explosion of technology and the increased use of automation, there are fewer jobs available for workers who are unskilled and/or have literacy skills deficits. Also the decrease in these types of jobs is predicted to continue (National Literacy Act of 1991, Section 2.8). As the workplace becomes more dependent upon technology, such as computers and e-mail, the need for workers to read and write at advanced levels becomes more and more crucial (Lieberth, 1994).

Finally, along with these basic workplace and job-specific technological skills, a number of worker attributes have been identified as critical for successful job maintenance and advancement. These attributes cut across all types of work and fall into four sequential and cumulative categories: task performance, teamwork, supervision, and socializing (Johnson, 1993; Oesting & Miller, 1977; Roesseler & Bolton, 1983). Workers who perform an adequate amount and quality of work with good attendance and punctuality records will demonstrate the level of task performance needed to maintain their jobs. However to advance, they will need to also demonstrate effective teamwork skills, as well as skills in the areas of supervision and socializing with co-workers.

Research Issues for Service Delivery and Policy

What do these workplace trends mean for people who are deaf and hard of hearing in particular? Unfortunately, due to obsolete job skills, many persons, including those with hearing impairments, are rapidly being phased out of the labor force. This problem is especially relevant for persons from ethnic minority groups. Members of these groups are most likely to be employed in occupations projected by the Bureau of Labor Statistics to be decreasing. African-Americans and Hispanics were 35% more likely to be employed in occupations projected to lose the most employees between the years 1978 and 1985 (Johnston & Packer, 1987; Offermann & Gowing, 1990). To maintain employment, these persons will be forced to shift to different occupations that require

different or additional skills.

Unskilled and low functioning people who are deaf or hard of hearing can expect to face the same challenges as unskilled and low functioning people with disabilities in general—difficulties in becoming employed, low pay, and job insecurity. Moreover, many unskilled, and even skilled, people who are deaf or hard of hearing will remain immobile or underemployed in their careers. Research is clearly needed to develop and evaluate rehabilitation interventions and services to enhance basic literacy as well as general career preparation.

For the person who is already employed, the picture is also changing. Even those workers who are fortunate to remain in traditional job categories will have to re-tool. As robotics and computers take over many of the manual repetitive tasks, the worker will have to enhance his or her skills to a new level of cognitive complexity. Hamilton (1988) notes that industry is spending record amounts for on-the-job training to enhance employee skills, at a magnitude equal in size to public elementary, secondary, and higher education combined.

In addition, as the work force grows older, it will become proportionately high in persons who are in their early to mid forties. This will result in increased competition for scarce high-level organizational positions. To succeed, the worker will be forced to actively seek promotion and to develop skills for promotability. Furthermore, despite the recent trend for early retirement, the changing nature of the work force will force persons to remain on the job longer (Faley, Kleiman, & Lengnick-Hall, 1984).

People who are deaf and hard of hearing with competitive skills will encounter fierce competition for advancement caused by the baby boomer bulge and downsizing by employers. Historically this group does not advance, with individuals often staying in a job for long periods (Crammatte, 1968; Lunde & Bigman, 1959; Schein, 1968; Schroedel, 1976/1977). Improved advancement opportunities will require improved basic skills in communication (including listening skills), adaptability, career planning, socializing (especially with co-workers working in teams), and leadership/supervision. However, for the most literate and highly trained segment of the deaf and hard of hearing population, advancement opportunities have improved somewhat. While some evidence indicates qualified persons, especially those with professional positions, receive promotions (Crammattee, 1987), much remains to be learned. Questions about glass ceiling effects, pay equity, gender differences, communication barriers, and barriers to becoming supervisors remain unanswered (Schroedel, Geyer, & McGee, 1996).

Workplace 2000

What do these and similar trends in the workplace mean for the new workers? Offerman and Growing (1990) argued that:

> Thus for new workers, the message for the year 2000 is clear. We must find a way to educate and train all individuals. The disturbing figures presented earlier mask a glimmering hope for groups of individuals who were previously disenfranchised. Their talents are needed, and their needs can no longer be ignored. The causes and solution to these problems go beyond any single organization. Joint cooperation between educators, legislators, and the business community is required if the work force needs of the year 2000 are to be met. For both new and continuing workers, issues of motivation and attitudes toward work will become more critical. As the work force continues to diversify, organizations will need to be especially attuned to the different expectations of different groups. The notion of America as a melting pot is giving way to a view of America as a rich assortment of different talents to be preserved rather than homogenized. The

traditional organizational focus on conformity through assimilation needs to be replaced by a true understanding of integration. (p. 98).

For the worker who is deaf or hard of hearing, these findings offer a "window of opportunity" (Long, 1990). Industry needs a supply of workers to contend with these problems. Qualified persons who are deaf or hard of hearing represent an inadequately tapped source of workers. Furthermore, as the population ages and workers continue in their positions, it is likely that many more workers will experience disability in some form, such as hearing impairment, which is one of the most frequent disabilities experienced during aging (NCHS, 1988). An end result will be an increase in the number of persons who are deaf or hard of hearing that are in the labor force. These persons will need appropriate accommodations to continue and succeed in the job market.

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